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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 002489

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [KNNP](#) [EU](#) [AU](#)
SUBJECT: AUSTRIA, ESDP, AND BATTLEGROUPS: ANOTHER CHALLENGE
TO NEUTRALITY?

REF: (A) VIENNA 2358 (B) VIENNA 2321

Classified By: A/DCM J. Dean Yap. Reason: 1.4(b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Austria's expected early November final cabinet decision to assign troops to EU battlegroups has already prompted one dust-up between the Defense and Foreign Ministries, with FonMin Plassnik opposing DefMin Darabos' statement that Austrian troops could only deploy on an EU mission under a UN mandate. We also expect to see challenges based on claims that Austrian participation in ESDP institutions is incompatible with Austrian neutrality - claims likely to be exaggerated in both the media and public opinion. However, more difficult issues revolve around the political and practical modalities of incorporating Austrian troops into a unit that should be deployable at short notice. Our interlocutors are confident that these are solvable and argue that there are few if any real-world scenarios in which Austria's neutrality will interfere with the deployment of EU battle groups (BGs). The political difficulty of the BG decision suggests that Austria will continue to be a drag on plans for ESDP development and that, despite the handful of vocal and committed advocates, the idea of abandoning neutrality to join NATO is still only an unpleasant fantasy for Austrians. To overcome this we should focus now on encouraging a realistic debate about the development of ESDP and NATO-EU relations. End Summary.

Background

¶2. (C) There are many reasons why, in early November, Austria's coalition government will probably decide to commit forces to the EU BGs. The most important is solidarity with and support for the process of European integration in the foreign and security policy fields. In addition, the MoD Policy Director, MG Johann Pucher, and MFA Security Policy chief Thomas Hajnoczi both acknowledge a desire to give the Austrian military a clearer strategic mission and a framework around which to restructure and modernize (to include adding more robust capabilities). At the same time, Austria's political preference (for some, obligation) for using its forces for peacekeeping and humanitarian purposes only - conflated in the public mind and much political commentary with the idea of neutrality - will require Austria to carefully negotiate its terms of entry into the BGs and to send units, according to Hajnoczi, which would be most useful for such operations (the first two tiers of Petersberg commitments). Our contacts, including Social Democratic advisor and think-tanker Heinz Gaertner, emphasize that were the issue of a combat mission to arise, Austria would likely be obliged to exercise some sort of opt out unless there were a UN mandate. With a UN mandate, as both Gaertner and Green

MP Ulrike Lunacek have told us, a war becomes a "police action" and therefore not a violation of Austrian neutrality.

13. (C) This opt out, many of our contacts acknowledge, could prove a political embarrassment for Austria - delaying EU decision-making for a UN mandate, "constructively abstaining" and withdrawing Austrian troops from a BG, or insisting that a different BG be used so as to avoid an Austrian deployment, would all be very difficult for Austria. However, our interlocutors believe that such a scenario is highly improbable in the foreseeable future. Hajnoczi suggests the BGs will be so organized that the one in which Austria participates would only be designated for low-end Petersberg missions. He also argues that, when presented with specific scenarios, Austrians indicate a willingness to act in support of EU missions even without a UN mandate. Gaertner, on the other hand, believes the EU would only engage in combat missions in extremis and that, in such cases, a UN mandate would be easily obtainable. Lunacek's solution to the problem is to avoid it by simply not endowing the BGs with the capability to carry out combat missions.

Upcoming Debate

14. (C) The Chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Caspar Einem (SPOe) professed uncertainty about the outcome of the debate and the cabinet decision (due Nov. 10, according to Hajnoczi). Within his own party, he acknowledged, there was a strong element that would oppose joining the BGs and there was a deeper problem with the SPOe's "cultural estrangement" from the military. He admitted that the SPOe had simply not been prepared to take over the Defense Ministry last January. The difficult

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intramural debate will be exacerbated by the EU's inter-governmental conference (IGC) on reviving the constitution, a broadly unpopular project in Austria. The IGC will provide fuel to the fundamentalist defenders of Austrian neutrality within and without the SPOe. First signals about the prospects for the cabinet decision will come after the SPOe parliamentary caucus debates the BG issue in early October, according to Einem.

15. (C) The issue of a UN mandate is also likely to be revived. Einem, Hajnoczi (and the MFA officially as well), and Pucher all shared the view that the Austrian Constitution, as amended by Article 23(f) in the early 1990s, allows deployment of Austrian forces for combat missions under either a UN, OSCE or EU mandate. Gaertner, Lunacek and Defense Minister Darabos (claiming to speak on a personal basis) reject this interpretation of the Constitution. Hajnoczi believes that Darabos will fall into line behind what has been the long-standing government position, but also acknowledged that the Minister's statements as well as the views of influential academics like Gaertner will not make for a simple debate.

16. (C) The BG debate may also be heightened if, as Gaertner and Hajnoczi have suggested to us, the government decides to offer a much larger troop component than the 260-270 recently mooted in the media. A larger component would not only make a more visible target, but would also complicate discussion about how to successfully integrate a substantial force while still respecting Austria's particular politico-military conditions.

Comment

7.(C) The Austrian public retains, as Hajnoczi described it, a "romantic" view of neutrality; many politicians on the left of the spectrum share this bias and those on the right have feared to challenge it. The resulting discontinuity between the desire to be both neutral and a participant in the

development of ESDP will make Austria a continuing burden on ESDP. That the debate about a relatively modest contribution to and role in EU BGs is so problematic is evidence that the tough issue of neutrality vs. NATO is not only politically untouchable (reftels), but is seen by most Austrians as an unpleasant, dangerous, and possibly immoral fantasy. Embassy and Washington support for a fact- and reality-based debate about the development of ESDP and NATO-EU relations would be perhaps the most productive steps toward changing these views. End Comment.

McCaw